

JOHN CIBORSKI AND THE *BABE IN ARMS* CREW

By James R. Ciborski, son of T/Sgt. John Ciborski



Technical Sergeant (T/Sgt.) John Ciborski served as the flight engineer and top turret gunner aboard a B-24 Liberator bomber nicknamed the *Babe in Arms* assigned to the Fifteenth Air Force in Italy in 1944. He was fortunate enough to fly with a close knit crew piloted by 2nd Lieutenant (Lt.) Homer W. “Bill” Smith. The story of the Babe’s crew is typical of many bomber crews during World War II—but when they formed at Gowen Field, ID in January 1944 they could not have anticipated the danger awaiting them over the skies of Europe, on the ground in occupied Yugoslavia, and (for two) the horrors of life as Prisoners of War (POW).

Early Life

Long before joining the crew John Ciborski dreamed of flying in airplanes. As a youth growing up in rural Michigan he would run out of his one-room schoolhouse when an airplane flew overhead—afterwards facing the wrath of his schoolteacher! John was born in Blue Island, IL in 1917, the son of Polish immigrants who moved to the Chicago suburb where John’s uncle lived. When John was four his family moved to Allegan, MI, purchasing an 80 acre farm. As John grew older he helped his parents and siblings work the farm. He briefly attended high school but had to drop out because he was needed on the farm.

The United States’ entry into World War II in 1941 soon changed his life forever. Before going off to war, John married Helen B. Ciszczon on October 31, 1942 and a mere two months later was on his way to Army basic training. John entered the Army at the 1610th Recruit Reception Center, Camp Grant, Rockford, IL, where he probably completed basic training. At some point he decided to pursue his desire to fly and volunteered for the U. S. Army Air Forces (USAAF), then a branch of the Army. Following basic training, Private First Class (Pfc.) Ciborski was accepted into the USAAF. He attended airplane mechanic training for 17 weeks, graduating from the B-24 mechanic’s school at Keesler Field, MS on September 3, 1943. Ciborski then graduated from the Harlingen Field, TX aerial gunnery school, completing the comprehensive six-week course late in 1943 and receiving his Silver Wings (gunnery). He was then transferred to the USAAF Combat-Crew Training Center, Gowen Field, near Boise, ID, by this time achieving the rank of Staff Sergeant (S/Sgt.).

Forming the Crew

On January 1, 1944, Ciborski became part of a 10-man crew piloted by Lt Smith. The other members of the crew came from all parts of the country after completing training in their specialties at various USAAF training centers. Smith came from Sandusky, MI, and the other officers of the crew consisted of: co-pilot 2nd Lt. Garvin M. McCain (Daingerfield, TX), navigator Flight Officer (FO.) Owen M. Akers (Chadron, NE), and bombardier 2nd Lt. Mitchel E. “Gene” Farris (St. Louis, MO). The enlisted crewmembers were: radio operator S/Sgt. Edgar Cooper (Niagara Falls, NY), nose gunner Sergeant (Sgt.) Thomas B. Hepburn (Hyde Park, PA), waist gunner Sgt. Charles B. Brashier, Jr. (Quitman, MS), ball turret gunner Sgt. Theodore Hallet (Port Chester, NY), tail gunner/armourer Sgt. Joseph R. “Joe” Falconetti (Jersey City, NJ), and flight engineer/top turret gunner S/Sgt. John Ciborski (Allegan, MI).



Standing Left to Right:

2nd Lt. Mitchell E. Farris – Bombardier

2nd Lt. Owen Akers – Navigator

2nd Lt. Garvin M. McCain – Co-Pilot

2nd Lt. Homer W. Smith – Pilot

Kneeling Left to Right:

T/Sgt. John Ciborski – Engineer

S/Sgt. Thomas B. Hepburn – Nose Gunner

S/Sgt. Theodore Hallet – Ball Turret Gunner

S/Sgt. Charles B. Brashier Jr. – Waist Gunner

S/Sgt. Joseph Falconetti – Armorer/Tail Gunner

T/Sgt. Edgar Cooper – Radio Operator

At this stage in the war the USAAF experienced especially heavy casualties in the European theater. Consequently, to alleviate the shortage all aircrew members did not receive the degree of training desired to fully prepare them for aerial combat. This was the case with the *Babe in Arms* crew. Some of the gunners did not have the opportunity to attend formal gunner training. For several months the crew flew training missions from Gowen Field, each crewmember honing his individual responsibilities while learning to work together as a crew. While at Gowen Field some of the crewmembers' wives were able to visit their husbands and Helen Ciborski made the trip from Michigan by train, staying in Boise for several days or possibly weeks.

In April 1944 Lt. Smith's crew completed its required combat crew training while flying an average of a dozen flights a month in B-24D, B-24E, B-24G, B-24H, and B-24J model bombers. By this time they had mastered their individual skills, became familiar with equipment and techniques, practiced formation flying and bombing, and learned to work together as a team.

In April 1944 the crew traveled to Topeka, KS to pick up a brand new B-24G, USAAF Serial Number 42-78234, fresh off the assembly line. According to Joe Falconetti, the six enlisted crewmembers went to see the movie *Babes in Arms* starring Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland. After discussing the idea of naming their plane after the movie they gained Lt Smith's approval. The crew "pooled their resources and had appropriate 'nose-art' painted on the plane.... [consisting] of a bikini-clad young lady astride a large bomb" with the name "BABE in ARMS" alongside the image. The image, said to be a "topless" Betty Grable, caused some grief for the crew on several occasions. Before departing Topeka for overseas deployment the crew proudly posed for a picture in front of their brand new B-24.



Overseas Deployment

Purportedly, upon arriving at Morrison Field, FL, in April 1944 Lt Smith was ordered to have a full bathing suit painted on the Babe's nose art, much to the chagrin of the crew! The *Babe* and her crew departed April 16th for overseas duty via the southern Atlantic air route. Although this route encompassed approximately 10,000 miles, it represented a safer option compared to the northern route through Greenland and Iceland. Although safer, the long distance between stops over endless ocean made precise navigation a necessity for survival. Like countless other aircraft during the war the *Babe in Arms* undertook the daunting journey, stopping at Trinidad/Tobago and Fortaleza, Brazil before crossing the Atlantic Ocean to Africa. After crossing the Atlantic they landed safely at Dakar, West Africa. The next leg of the deployment proved challenging as they ran out of oxygen and had to descend to low altitude while also flying through a severe sandstorm *en route* to Casablanca, Morocco. The crew remained at the air base in Casablanca for four days while the *Babe* was prepared for its next flight. After recouping from this leg of the journey the crew flew to Algiers, Tunis, arriving at its final destination—Manduria Airfield, Italy on April 28th. The airfield was codenamed "Frantic".

The 720th Bomb Squadron

Lt. Smith and his crew were assigned to the 720th Bombardment Squadron, 450th Bombardment Group (450th BG), 47th Wing, of the Fifteenth Air Force. The 450th was nicknamed "The Cottontails" because their B-24s had white tail rudders. The *Babe* soon displayed the other markings of the 47th (a black triangle in a white disk), the number "4" (also in a white disk) identifying the 450th as the fourth group within the Wing, and a smaller number "4" which stood for the "plane-in-group" number. The crew settled into life at the airfield with the enlisted members housed in a tent, John Ciborski noting in his diary "Used 6 Blankets last night." The first few days included a lecture on enemy fighter tactics, a practice bombing mission, and formation flying training.

The *Babe in Arms* crew arrived at a difficult time for the 450th BG because of bad weather, crew shortages, and the heavy losses sustained since beginning combat operations in January 1944. Combat participation also suffered because of these factors, especially in February and March with only nine and ten missions flown, respectively. The 720th had experienced an especially troublesome beginning, losing its first commander, Capt. Clark J. Wicks, who was fatally wounded on January 30th. Capt. Gordon T. Colley became the new commander on February 3rd but only remained in that position until May when he was succeeded by Capt. (later Major) Grant D. Caywood.

By the middle of March the 720th had already lost half of its original crews! The first replacement crews arrived in March, squadron manpower reaching its highest level to date by the end of April (514 personnel compared to a low of 441 at the beginning of March). Mission

participation also increased to 17 in April. Despite the addition of new crews, several sources indicate that squadron morale was very low when Lt Smith's crew arrived. In his study of Capt. Caywood's crew (*Shadow: A Cottontail Bomber Crew in World War II*, 2004), author Neil H. Raiford explained the effects of this situation: "There was a bit of stigma attached to being a replacement crew. To the veteran crews, replacements were a painful daily reminder of lost friends." After the war many veterans remembered how they tended to limit contact with other crews because of the high number of losses. Raiford also noted a similar effect on replacement crews as they became seasoned through combat: "They understood the coolness shown to replacements. Each wondered if his luck was running out."

When replacement crews arrived they were initially split up to fly their first missions with experienced crews. Consequently, Bill Smith flew several practice missions as copilot with an experienced pilot. John Ciborski, and probably other members of the *Babe's* crew, flew three of these practice missions with Lt. Smith during early May. Lt. Smith apparently flew his first combat mission (as copilot) on May 4th but had to abort before reaching the target (the Ploesti Marshalling Yards, Romania) because of bad weather. Ploesti quickly became a feared target because of its heavy defenses. On May 5th Ploesti was again the target and John Ciborski experienced his first combat mission, flying the eight hour, 1,300 mile roundtrip mission in the *Babe in Arms* piloted by 2nd Lt. Paul B. Cantrell. Ciborski described the experience: "I fired right waist [gun], shot 25 rounds at [an] ME-109 [German fighter] ... flak thick enough to walk on, 8 holes in our ship." He flew his first combat mission with Lt. Smith as pilot on May 6th against the Brasov, Romania Marshalling Yard. Instead of the *Babe in Arms*, they had to fly the mission in another B-24 nicknamed *Hard to Get*.

The "Squabble" Over The Babe in Arms

The squadron was the basic unit of the Army Air Forces, essentially an extended family for the crews who were bonded by a common mission while facing shared dangers and experiences. Aircraft maintenance and all other support functions within the squadron worked toward one goal—to keep the aircraft and aircrews ready to execute their missions. Just like a family where brothers had their share of disagreements and arguments, disputes sometimes arose between aircrews within the squadron. Developing a cohesive and efficient aircrew able to work together in combat required intensive training—causing most crews to develop the close bond so necessary for their survival in the air. Throughout the Army Air Forces aircrews were very possessive and protective of their assigned aircraft, and naming and applying distinctive nose art presented a visible sign of their unity and pride.

The *Babe in Arms* crew had already developed this bond by the time they arrived at Manduria. Lt. Smith described his crew as a happy-go-lucky bunch but very professional in the air. The very day they arrived at Manduria a series of events began within the squadron which caused a squabble over who would fly their coveted *Babe in Arms*.

On April 28th, one of the newer 720th crews piloted by 2nd Lt. Harry L. Foster Jr., was assigned to fly *Pistol Packin' Mama*, #42-52124. 2nd Lt. Francis "Frank" D. Bauder, bombardier on that crew, remembered someone saying: "Did you know this plane has the best sortie record in the Squadron? It's now flown more missions than any of our planes still flying." Bauder was part of Foster's crew, flying against Orbetello, Italy on that day. Hit by anti aircraft fire on the west coast of Italy, the crew successfully bailed out before *Pistol Packin' Mama* crashed on its 39th mission.

Pistol Packin' Mama had been flown to Manduria by Lt. Cantrell as part of the original 450th cadre arriving at Manduria in December 1943. The Cantrell crew had undoubtedly developed a strong attachment to *Pistol Packin' Mama*, especially with its squadron-leading mission total. The loss of *Pistol Packin' Mama* apparently prompted a squabble between the Smith and Cantrell crews as both wanted to fly the *Babe in Arms*. It was not unusual for veteran crews to acquire newly arrived B-24s once replacement crews started coming in. For example, Neil Raiford noted that when *Shadow*, #42-52611, was damaged beyond repair earlier in April, Capt. Caywood "exercised his power as squadron ops [operations] officer and procured *Sleepy Time Gal* for ... [*Shadow's* crew]." During May and June the Smith and Cantrell crews flew the *Babe in Arms* on different missions and she was flown by at least one other pilot as well. Although the full story may never be known, one source indicates that Caywood (who had become squadron commander) ultimately permitted the Smith crew to claim the *Babe* as theirs. However, it is more likely the issue was never settled and that the two crews continued their squabble.

The Babe's Changing Nose Art

At some point during the deployment to Manduria, or shortly after arriving, the Smith crew arranged to return the *Babe's* nose art to a "topless" state. However, existing photos prove this was not the final change in artwork appearance. Several versions of the *Babe's* distinctive look were painted on its nose during the bomber's short tenure at Manduria. Apparently, the original artwork showed the *Babe*, her legs pointed downward and holding a 50-caliber machine gun while astride a bomb. One version displays the *Babe* with windswept hair and different lettering of her name. In still another version her legs are more horizontally positioned parallel with the bomb. The photos also prove the nose art existed on both sides of the nose of the fuselage, but it is not known if both sides displayed different images simultaneously or at different times since application of the original artwork at Topeka. The *Babe* also purportedly had some "tail art" near the tail turret. According to Joe Falconetti, Smith's tail gunner, two of his crewmembers surprised him by having the ground crew paint a nest containing eggs marked with the swastika and the words "Falcon's Roost" in reference to his name. Unfortunately, no photographs of this have yet surfaced.

There are indications that the *Babe's* nose art was changed, modified, or reapplied for another reason—which at first may seem hard to believe. Lt. Smith is said to have looked for

targets of opportunity while returning to base after a mission. This was not uncommon in World War II, especially if an unused load of bombs had to be disposed of before returning to base. As the story goes, the crew would sometimes leave the formation and strafe enemy ground facilities if they had fired on the *Babe* while *en route* to the target. Allegedly, Smith sometimes flew so low there would be green residue from vegetation under the wings and belly of the plane! To avoid the wrath of higher authority, he would fly very low over the Adriatic Sea to create prop wash to clean off the evidence of his transgression. In the process, some of the nose art washed off. If true, this would help to explain the different versions of the *Babe*'s trademark each time it had to be repainted.

While the above may seem implausible, there is further evidence to imply the story might be true. 1st Lt. Gerald M. French, also in the 720th, described flying near Italian fishing boats during test flights: "I would go down there about 20-40 feet off the deck right over their boats . . . , go right over the top of them, pull up on a steep climb, and the propeller wash . . . would blow them over. I use to go and 'tip over' the sailboats. Of course I was 19 and was having a lot of fun, although I should have known better. . . . [and] I got pretty well 'chewed out'." Another example recounts the exploits of 720th pilot, 2nd Lt. Winston C. "Bud" Watson: "'Bud and close friend 'Frenchy' [Gerald French?] would often celebrate survival [after a mission] by challenging each other to 'cut corn.' This meant they would fly their B-24 Liberators low enough to the Italian country side to trim the tops of corn stalks with their propellers upsetting the local farmers and aggravating superior officers back on base." Although hard to believe, these examples serve to make one realize anything was possible in wartime—especially with the abundance of youthful pilots and aircrew members facing the rigors of combat and their uncertain futures.

May and June 1944

After flying practice and actual missions with experienced crews, the *Babe in Arms* crew quickly became immersed in the Cottontails' challenging flight schedule. Lt Smith's crew had arrived just in time to participate in the "Battle for Oil" against the oil refineries and storage yards supplying the Axis Powers with one of their most important commodities. During this period the majority of the Fifteenth Air Force engaged the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe, in especially savage aerial combat. It is not known for certain when the entire *Babe in Arms* crew flew its first combat mission together because the official combat records are only available for Smith, Ciborski, and Hepburn. However, their first mission as a crew may have occurred on May 6th against Brasov, Romania flying in *Hard to Get*. The records of these three individuals provide insight into the crew's intense flying schedule. During May/June they flew the following numbers of combat missions: Smith (18/8), Ciborski (15/8), and Hepburn (12/7).

Ciborski's diary records the missions he flew with Smith (and the names of other pilots) and usually the last three digits of the serial number of the aircraft flown. These included flights in Liberators bearing some intriguing names: *Charlot the Harlot*, *Jappa Nooga Choo Choo*,

Dottie Darling, and *Piqua Bandolear*, as well as the *Babe*. It is likely the entire crew flew together on the majority of these missions. Although Lt McCain's records are unavailable, Smith noted that they normally split the flying time during missions as pilot and co-pilot. As flight engineer, John Ciborski was the senior enlisted member of the crew and was responsible for the operation of the aircraft in flight, including transferring fuel from the auxiliary tanks. He also served as a gunner, normally manning two .50-caliber machine guns in the top turret located immediately behind the cockpit. This location also made him readily available to the pilots for any needed consultation about the plane's mechanical systems.

Although May and June presented a busy flying schedule, the crew did have some diversions. John Ciborski, most likely accompanied by at least some of his crew, saw a United Service Organizations (USO) show in nearby Oria, attended church in Manduria, and went swimming in the Adriatic Sea. He also flew with Capt. Caywood to Naples, viewing and taking pictures of Mount Vesuvius which had recently erupted. On May 23rd he received his promotion to T/Sgt.

Factors beyond their control sometimes prevented the crew from completing a mission. On May 18th Lt. Smith was forced to turn the *Babe in Arms* around due to bad weather—undoubtedly a frustrating five-hour mission. Other challenging missions included Wiener-Neustadt, Austria and the feared Ploesti when the *Babe* returned to Manduria with 15 holes from very accurate anti aircraft fire and fighter opposition. On June 6th when the Allied invasion of Normandy began (D-Day), Ciborski again flew in Lt. Watson's crew against Ploesti. June 11th proved to be the last time John Ciborski flew in the *Babe in Arms* and the last time he flew a combat mission with Lt. Smith—the course of war was about to change for the entire crew.

June 13, 1944—Mission to Munich

On June 13th the Allach Motor Works in Munich, Germany was the 25th mission for Lt. Smith and most of his crew. By 0630 (6:30 am) the 450th had launched 41 bombers with the *Babe in Arms* in the lead element of the second attack unit. Smith had all of his original crew except John Ciborski. The accounts differ as to why he did not fly this mission. Either he was scratched from the mission because of illness or he did not fly because the crew was breaking in a new man, S/Sgt. (later T/Sgt.) Paul H. Gritten, also a flight engineer. However, Gritten flew the mission as the right waist gunner. This was only Gritten's first or second mission (the records on this differ as well) and it is likely Lt. Smith assigned Brashier as flight engineer, especially since he had some experience as Ciborski's backup, or 2nd flight engineer. As an example how the fog of war can cloud the records, the Missing Aircrew Report (MACR) contradicts itself on different pages, actually showing Ciborski as part of the crew that day! It seems likely that Ciborski did not fly because of illness, which provided the crew the opportunity to break in Gritten on the mission.

Flying to the target the crew flew through “heavy, intense, and very accurate” flak (anti-aircraft fire) for 23 minutes causing severe damage to the *Babe in Arms* which absorbed approximately 200 hits. When the plane was hit the flight engineer was thrown from the upper turret. The pilots were forced to leave the formation with damage to the number one and number two engines and fuel leaking badly from the left wing. With the Alps ahead of them and the *Babe* losing altitude, Smith ordered the crew to throw out everything they could, including the machine guns, helmets, flak suits, ammunition, and the bomb sight. As if they did not have enough to deal with, a flight of Focke-Wolf 190 fighters attacked the now defenseless bomber. Fortunately, American P-38 fighters drove the Germans off.

After estimating the remaining fuel Lt. Akers advised the pilot to head for Yugoslavia where the crew would have a better chance of bailing out over a safe area instead of heading for German occupied northern Italy. Flying at less than 12,000 feet altitude through mountain passes, the *Babe* next encountered heavy flak forcing the pilots to take evasive action. With their fuel very low (the gauges read empty for the last 15 minutes of flight!), Smith ordered the crew to bail out. For some, this was not an easy task. The bombardier, Gene Farris, was caught by the slipstream and banged against the main beam in the bomb-bay. Paul Gritten’s chute deployed prematurely forcing him to hold the billowed chute in his arms. Joe Falconetti jumped with him through the bomb-bay, breaking away once Gritten’s chute inflated. Akers had his own problems: “My chute wouldn’t open at first, but shear [sic] panic and frantic wiggling worked it loose to a full blossom. I have never had my neck snapped so hard....”

Before bailing out Bill Smith set the controls of the *Babe in Arms* for stable flight but the Liberator circled around scaring him into thinking he might be hit by the empty plane. Fortunately, the crew’s beloved *Babe* did not hit any of them—instead, she crashed into the side of a mountain and exploded. The crew had bailed out near the Adriatic Sea, ten miles east of Bihac and north of Split, Yugoslavia. When Bill Smith landed he hurt his knee; McCain suffered either a broken chest bone or cracked ribs; Falconetti cracked a bone in his foot; Farris hit his head on a rock (affecting the vision in one eye); and Hepburn sprained an ankle. Considering what they had just endured, all of the crew survived the bailout. However, this was just the beginning of their adventures in a country occupied by the Germans and contested by several ethnic groups.

Very quickly after landing both Bill Smith and Ed Cooper encountered what they thought were friendly partisans. As it turned out, they were unfriendly Ustachi who had been skirmishing with the partisans. The Ustachi turned both men over to the Germans as POWs. Meanwhile, the remaining eight members of the crew were rescued by various partisan groups and reunited at a central point four days later. Although the official records such as the S-2 Narrative Report, the MACR, the Escape – Evasion – Repatriation report, and the 720th squadron monthly history, provide the essential details of the mission, Owen Akers recorded an incredibly detailed account of the crew’s daily experiences in a 3 by 5 inch notebook. The Akers’ account

is the most reliable record of their adventures while hiding out with the partisans and evading capture because he was a firsthand participant recording the information almost immediately.

American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) operatives visited the crew advising “that nearly every flyer parachuting into that particular area near Gospic were captured....” This fact made the crew feel especially lucky as they anticipated rescue, a return to Italy, and a quick return to the United States. At that time American flyers who escaped from enemy territory were not permitted to fly combat missions again. This rule prevented anyone from a second possible escape and evasion situation where they might compromise information to the detriment of the OSS, the partisans, or other downed flyers.

The OSS contacted U. S. forces in Italy to arrange for their rescue along with several other Allied personnel, some who had been waiting with the partisans for 70 days. After several days the partisans confirmed that Smith and Cooper had been captured and McCain learned he had been only 200 yards from the Ustachi. The crew had actually bailed out only two miles from the retreating Germans. The partisans took good care of the crew, providing food, shelter, and even entertainment. They were provided tobacco and tea, played card games, listened to ten partisan girls singing, and watched a group of dancers. According to Akers: “Every Partisan that I met treated us like the best of friends.... They would give us anything they had, yet they had so little for themselves.”

Finally, after several nights of disappointed anticipation, an American C-47 transport landed on a makeshift landing strip on June 27th to rescue the crew and other evading Allied personnel. A B-24 from the 485th Bomb Group at Venosa, Italy had crashed several days earlier and its survivors were among the 21 to 23 men rescued. Landing at night, the blacked-out rescue ship spent only 10 minutes on the ground as the men quickly climbed aboard, most leaving their shoes, jackets, and other items for the partisans. The C-47 headed out over the Adriatic for Allied occupied Italy, landing at Bari at 0220 hours. The elated returnees were given medical checkups, American coffee, and American Red Cross kits containing personal items.

Upon returning to Manduria the crew received the unexpected news that they would be returned to combat! As luck would have it, the USAAF had changed the rule about evaders not returning to combat. The effective date was June 12th—the day before they were shot down! They were the first crew to be “caught” by the rule change. The eight evaders soon returned to flying status with the 720th to complete their required 50 missions. However, they did receive five days of rest and relaxation (R & R) at a seaside resort (probably Santa Cesarea, Italy).

Sadly for the crew, the joy of being rescued was dampened by uncertainty over the fate of Smith and Cooper. Ironically, both men apparently ended up spending the rest of the war as POWs at Stalag Luft III in Sagan, Upper Silesia, Poland. This camp was relatively close to Munich—the very city they had flown against! Officers and enlisted men were held in separate parts of the camp and Smith only saw Cooper once. Cooper came up to the fence separating

their areas and threw a hard-boiled egg to Smith. With the Russian army advancing on Stalag Luft III in early 1945, the Germans evacuated the camp. According to Bill Smith, the starving POWs were forced to walk over 100 miles to Dresden, Germany in a blizzard. He was later loaded onto a railroad box car packed with other POWs and transported westward. American forces under General George S. Patton later liberated the POWs. The details of Cooper's escape from the camp are unknown but he returned to the United States in May 1945, as did Smith.

While the Crew was Gone

The day after losing his crew Ciborski started flying missions with other crews. On June 23rd he noted in his diary "I was assigned to Lt. Ericksons [Maurice A. Erickson] crew today" but there is no record of him flying with that pilot. Besides flying combat and training missions, he played baseball on the 720th inter-squadron team, a sport he had played in Allegan before the war. After the war John Ciborski liked to tell a story about meeting a man in Italy who he played baseball with (or against) in Michigan. What makes the story unique is that the serviceman he ran into was African-American and with the U. S. military still segregated at the time it had to be an unusual site to see the two men hugging and Ciborski telling him he was a sight for sore eyes. The man's name and unit is unknown but he may have been a truck driver who transported soldiers between bases in Italy (possibly from St. Joseph, MI).

The Crew Back in Action

John Ciborski went to the rest camp at Santa Cesarea from July 8-14, probably with the remainder of his recently returned crew. The war would never be the same for the crew with their pilot and radio operator gone. Consequently, they became part of the extra crewmember pool within the squadron, sometimes flying with each other while augmenting other crews. Also, some of the crew had to recover from their injuries prior to returning to flying status. Farris had the longest recovery and was grounded for almost three months. He was later assigned as Assistant Group Bombardier with operations planning and flying duties.

On July 15th, McCain, Akers, Brashier, Falconetti, and Hepburn augmented Lt. Carl E. Mulhollan's crew on a mission against Ploesti. Ploesti was always a difficult target and the flak was terrible on that day. Three engines suffered damage, with number 3 shot out and numbers one and two operating on limited power. Four crewmembers were wounded, including Mulhollan and Akers. Fortunately for Akers, he carried a metal covered bible in his breast pocket which deflected some of the shrapnel and minimized his injuries. With this many wounded, and Mullhollan suffering from shock, the crew could not abandon the aircraft. After throwing out the guns and other heavy equipment the plane managed to remain aloft. On the return to Manduria enemy fighters attacked but the crew was saved by six P-38 fighters who drove them off. Working together to help each other, the crew managed to render medical aid to the wounded and successfully landed the plane at Manduria. Each member of this crew received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for their actions: "Through their outstanding cooperation

and professional skill, working tirelessly to maintain control of their almost unairworthy aircraft, they successfully brought their ship in ... for a safe landing....”

As stated above, the war would never be the same for the *Babe in Arms* crew with Bill Smith and Ed Cooper POWs. Their numbers soon dwindled again when Ted Hallet left for the U.S. on July 16th. Joe Falconetti soon followed, reportedly joining Hallet in Bari before both boarded a troop ship for the return home. After the Ploesti mission Akers spent some time in the hospital and is believed to have been assigned as lead navigator for either the 720th or for the entire 450th BG.

McCain, Farris, Hepburn, Brashier, and Ciborski continued flying missions. During July and August Ciborski flew with [2nd] Lt. Mayo for most of his combat and training missions. In September Ciborski began flying missions with [2nd] Lt. Mart L. Cope, Jr., and one document lists McCain, Brashier, Ciborski, Hepburn, and another man, S/Sgt. Paul Siler, as part of his crew. Although this was not a permanent assignment to a crew, the missions with Lt. Cope did provide the opportunity for several of the former *Babe in Arms* crewmembers to fly together. Except for Ciborski and Hepburn, it is unknown when each of these men completed their missions and returned to the States. Hepburn flew his 40th and final mission on September 8th and probably left soon thereafter.

John Ciborski's 41st Mission

August 29th found John Ciborski flying with yet another pilot, 1st Lt. Inglett (or Inglet, first name unknown) against the Po River railroad bridge, Ferrara, Italy. Heavy and very accurate flak shot out engine numbers 1 and 4, but Lt. Inglett kept the ship aloft for 40 minutes when most of the crew bailed out. Ciborski was the fourth man out. His parachute harness bruised one eye and he landed very hard in a hayfield. Two other crewmembers suffered sprained ankles on landing. The pilot ended up landing the plane because one crewmember was unable to bailout. Ciborski described his escape: “I landed about 4 miles inside our lines. The area had been taken within [the] past 24 hours. – Polish soldiers picked me up [and] also the rest of the crew. We had ship #378 [42-95378]. There were 138 flak holes in it.” Ciborski was able to converse with the Polish troops (who were assigned to British forces in the area) because he grew up speaking Polish. Needless to say, the Polish troops took good care of their new found Polish speaking friend and his crew before they were flown back to Manduria the following day!

September and October Missions

Several days later on September 5th Ciborski, along with McCain and Hepburn, flew against the same target at Ferrara. Flying with Mart Cope in #42-50893 the results were different this time and they returned unscathed. On September 6th Ciborski flew with 1st Lt. Harold F. Stratton in *Sleepy Time Gal*, #42-78211, against German troop concentrations near Leskovac, Yugoslavia, encountering no flak or fighters. Stratton had also flown the Ferrara mission on August 31st. His plane was badly shot up and the crew had bailed out over Pescara,

Italy. Because of their injuries on this mission several members of his crew were temporarily placed on duty not involving flying.

On September 10th Stratton flew #42-50893 against Vienna, with part of his regular crew and three substitutes filling in for those injured on August 29th. Paul Gritten was one of the replacements. After Gritten had returned from Yugoslavia with the remainder of the *Babe in Arms* crew he returned to flight status, also flying with a variety of pilots and crews. By this time he had also been promoted to T/Sgt. Paul Gritten was flying as Stratton's flight engineer and top turret gunner that day. According to S/Sgt. Adrian E. Cox, flying in a nearby aircraft: "Just as the formation turned on the bomb run, I saw Lieutenant Stratton's aircraft receive a direct hit on the right wing and the wing snapped off. The plane went into a dive for about 10,000 feet and caught on fire, then the aircraft exploded." Sadly, Paul Gritten was among those killed. Only two of the crew survived, successfully parachuting out but spending the rest of the war as POWs.



Paul Gritten

John Ciborski flew the majority of his final missions with Mart Cope. His 46th mission was against Larissa, Greece on September 15th. This was probably the last time he flew a mission with one of his original *Babe in Arms* crewmembers as Lt. McCain served as Cope's co-pilot. His 47th mission took him over the marshalling yards at Budapest, Hungary on September 17th. Ciborski had to wait until October 4th to complete his 48th mission, encountering heavy flak over the Brenner Pass rail lines near Bolzano, Italy.

On October 7th Ciborski completed his combat tour on a double-credit mission (his 49th and 50th), flying with Mart Cope against the oil storage facilities at Vienna. Flying in #42-78610, he noted in his diary: "FINITO!! Had less than 100 gals. [gallons of] gas left when

we landed.... My last mission, what a relief.” Mart Cope shared a similar memory: “John was on my right side during the landing watching all the needles—I remember he told me to make all the turns flat so we would not drain a gas tank—thus we landed safely and John got his 50th....”

New Assignments

John Ciborski was credited with 50 missions, including some missions which counted as double credit because of the increased danger from heavily defended targets. Ploesti stands out as the best example and he flew four times against this target. Other especially difficult missions he flew included Vienna and Weiner-Neustadt, Austria. He earned the European, African Middle Eastern Theatre Ribbon; the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters; six Bronze Battle Stars; and the Good Conduct Medal. His parachute jump also made him an informal member of the Caterpillar Club (for anyone who successfully used a parachute to escape a disabled aircraft). In October or November he returned to the United States aboard a troop ship, as evidenced by a shipboard newsletter entitled “The Seaweed Sentinel” he saved as a souvenir. He then reported to Fort Sheridan, IL before being assigned to the Army Air Forces Redistribution Station No. 2, Miami, FL. Granted a delay *en route*, he probably went home to Allegan on furlough. During his time in Miami he spent several weeks in rest and recreation, also undergoing medical examinations and classification interviews to determine his next assignment.

In January or February 1945 he was assigned to the 3704th Army Air Force Base Unit (AAFBU), Keesler Field, MS as an instructor at the airplane engine school. Sadly, his father, Frank Ciborski, died in Michigan on February 26th. His duties as an instructor were short lived and he was reassigned to Chanute Field, IL to attend the Airplane Power Plant Mechanic (Pratt and Whitney) course. At this time John was granted a furlough, visiting Allegan for four days. Ironically, at some point after returning from Italy he learned he could have gotten an extra 10 day furlough “if the fact that he bailed out over enemy territory due to enemy action had not been omitted from his service record.” This would not be the last time he encountered difficulties because of incomplete military records! John passed this information on to his old unit at Manduria and a notice appeared in the March 11, 1945 issue of the 450th BG newspaper *Molto Buono* advising flyers to be aware of this benefit.

Following his brief furlough, John completed the power plant course at Chanute on June 2nd and then went to Hondo Army Air Field, TX to attend the Airplane Power Plant mech [mechanic] Sub-Course (R-1820 & R-2800 [engines]). He then began training at Hondo for potential combat in the Pacific, attending the B-29 (Superfortress bomber) Flight Engineer School. Japan’s surrender spared him from another combat tour and he transferred to the Separation Center at Fort Sheridan, IL, receiving his honorable discharge on September 7th, 1945.

Post-War

John Ciborski returned to Allegan and resumed life as a civilian, raising two children with his wife Helen. He was unable to operate the 80-acre farm he grew up on because of the injury to his back from his parachute jump. Instead, he found employment in the auto industry, eventually becoming a parts inspector and a United Auto Workers (UAW) union representative in Allegan. Receiving treatment for his back injury at Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals he was classified as a disabled veteran, but only at the smallest rating. The disability determination completely rejected his back injury claim and his rating was only based on comparatively minor issues, including his Malaria. The incomplete information in his service records made it impossible to prove the nature and cause of his painful back injury.

Very little information is available about the post-war lives of the other crewmembers of the *Babe in Arms*. Some of the crew was recalled for duty in the Korean War, including Bill Smith and Garvin McCain. Bill Smith lived in Michigan and visited John Ciborski to go goose hunting in the 1950s. McCain retired from the reserves as a Lt. Colonel, became Dr. McCain, head of the Psychology Department at the University of Texas at Arlington, and became an author.

Tom Hepburn married and raised a family of three children. Owen Akers remained in the Air Force, raised a daughter, retired as a Lt. Colonel, and then worked as a navigational scientist for the Defense Mapping Agency. Joe Falconetti and his wife raised three children and he retired as Chief of the Littleton, CO Fire Department.

As the years passed the crew slowly began to reconnect with each other. Widely separated throughout the U.S., they talked to each other on the phone. John Ciborski remembered a conference call in 1985 with Tom Hepburn and Ed Cooper: "I hadn't talked with Cooper since he took off on the mission in which he was shot down and taken as a P.O.W." In the early 1990s Gene Farris started writing a periodic "*Babe in Arms* Communique," to share information with each other. For several years Farris had searched for the members of the crew until he located everybody and they then planned a reunion. Seven of the ten original crewmembers were able to attend the reunion in St. Louis, MO on June 13, 1992—exactly 48 years after the *Babe in Arms* was shot down over Yugoslavia. A local news release about the reunion noted that the ten crewmembers received over one hundred awards and decorations during their service.



Left to Right:

Owen Akers, Edgar Cooper, Garvin McCain,

Mitchell Farris, Charles Brashier, John Ciborski and Thomas Hepburn

Just like some of his crewmembers and countless other veterans, John Ciborski endured the physical and emotional pains of having served in combat. Like so many veterans he lived with survivor's guilt, especially because in September 1944 he flew a mission in a plane that was lost several days later with most of the crew. In another twist of fate, that plane was flown by a pilot he had recently flown with! Flying combat missions was the luck-of-the-draw for everyone. John Ciborski was lucky to not fly on the day his crew was shot down in June and even luckier in September and throughout the remainder of his combat tour.

John retired in 1974 and enjoyed fishing, hunting, and traveling. He continued to contest the disability determination with the VA to have his injury properly classified. This proved difficult and he often voiced frustration with the VA bureaucracy. When he filed one appeal he noted: "Service records show I was treated for this [back injury] while in service.... So far all the V.A. has done is completely ignore all facts and evidence. My word and evidence doesn't seem to carry any weight in determining my claim." Finally, after several decades, he succeeded in obtaining a higher disability rating in May 1998. Finally, the VA believed him! John Ciborski passed away on November 6, 1998.

Postscript

All of the crewmembers of the *Babe in Arms* are gone now. Ironically, the same year the last crewmember passed away, a group of aircraft crash site researchers reported they had found the remains of the *Babe in Arms* in Croatia! They found enough small pieces from a plane to conclude it was a B-24. The search was hampered by the existence of mines (from more recent wars) and heavy fog in the thickly forested mountain region.

Author's Note

The above is only a small part of the crew's activities and adventures in the turbulent times of World War II. I have planned to write this account for years and finally pulled together a large variety of sources—but with any historical account—there are always gaps and missing information. I hope this article will encourage others to share any available information and documentation about the *Babe in Arms* so the crew's full story can be preserved for future generations. The 450th Bombardment Group (H) Memorial Association hosts a website ideally suited to preserve and present this information (www.450thbg.com).

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